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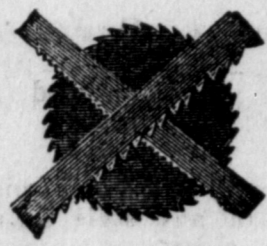
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W. CLARKE RUSSELL.

(Condensed for THE REVIEW.)

CHAPTER XXVI.—Continued

"Oh, if I were only dressed as you are, Mr. Musgrave!" in a voice so charged with bitter vexation that it was almost like hearing her sob. "Do not venture too far. Be cautious, for my sake. What shall I do if I am left alone here?"

"I will not go far," said I; "stand you in this black shadow. In the haze of the moon you will be able to see anything that may run this way. Let fly at it, will you, should it come? Only please take care not to shoot me."

With that I left her, and droved with trudging steps through the coarse, wiry undergrowth, helped somewhat by recollection of the road I had taken in the morning, and aided also by the sound of the bell. From the whole area of the island the concert of the crickets rose in a volume of chirruping; everything seemed awake and nothing could be imagined more confounding than this sweep of multitudinous noise, close to one's, very ear as it seemed with the notes of unseen things crying out of the grass upon which one trod, and from the near hidden trunks of the trees, and the stoop of the dusky boughs overhead.

However, I had not advanced fifty paces when I found further progress impossible. There was no question, however, that the chimes came from the bell I had inspected in the morning, so I levelled a pistol at the blackness in the direction whence the sounds were coming and fired. The trees all round me glauced out yellow to the flame; the bell instantly ceased; but one had to listen to make sure, so deafening was the noise among the branches of the terrified creatures roosting up there. I levelled a second pistol and fired again, with a renewal of the distracting outbreak overhead, rolling in a wave of discordant uproar, so wild with intermingling of tropic throats, with single near yells, groans, snots, gasps, and pippings, following as it were in the wake of the rushing clamor, that the effect upon the hearing defies language. I waited a little, eagerly hearkening. The ringing had ended. The forest noises died away, and in a few minutes you heard nothing but the familiar croakings and chirrupings, chiefly out in the open. There were too many trees in road to render it likely I had hit the ringer; indeed, I had not fired with that idea. But I thought that whatever it was that rang the bell might come sneakingly my way, and I strained my hearing for any sound resembling the coarse growth crushed by the foot; but nothing of the sort was audible, so I returned to Miss Grant and walked with her back to where the hammock was.

Well, it was a mystery not to be solved by wondering at it. I own I slept but little that night through thinking of it, while Miss Grant next morning confessed that she had not closed her eyes.

CHAPTER XXVII.

I SHOOT THE BELL-RINGER.

Indeed, this mysterious midnight bell-ringing was a puzzle that presently threatened to render the island solitude desperately uncomfortable when the sun was up, and absolutely hideous when he had gone down. It was time it was dealt with some way or other. A few more such nights as the two we had passed might play havoc with Miss Grant's nerves; and our loneliness and helplessness were already so extreme that one felt it might presently go hard with one's brain if the paralyzing conditions of being marooned were to be supplemented by an element of mystery nicely calculated to finish off in the intellect the work which grief, suffering and despair had begun.

So when the morning came I slipped away for a plunge, feeling the need of a refreshment of that kind, after lying long in my clothes upon the powdery dust of my sandy couch; then returning and asking Miss Grant to spread a little breakfast for us meanwhile, I clapped my pistols into my pocket and plunged into the wood. I steered a pretty straight course for the bell, looking earnestly about me as I thrust my way along; and when I arrived at it, I stood surveying it for several minutes, wondering if the problem of the ringing was to be solved by an explanation that should be ridiculous for its simplicity when hit upon. But not a ghost of a solution offered. No; some hand—man's beast's, or ghost's—must have rung the thing. I touched it, and it swung so heavily and stiffly that it was impossible any bird, even the biggest on the island, alighting, could have swayed it to the emission of a single chime.

I peered curiously at the adjacent trees, but witnessed no sort of hollow in which anything of bulk could hide itself. I stared searchingly round for mark of human or other tread, for hint of subterranean habitation, for any sign, in short, to resolve me this bewildering mystery; but the scene, so far as I could see, was as bare of such suggestion as I sought as the bell itself. I considered for a moment whether I should return for a musket and beat down the green and moldering frame but on peering close at the bell I observed that it was suspended to an iron hook in

the gallows-like beam. This gave me an idea, and putting my hands to the bell, I lifted it off its hook and placed it on the ground. 'Twas a tolerably heavy piece of metal, though not so weighty but what I could easily carry it. There has been so very little change for centuries in the fashion of bells that no man could have told how old this one was by the look of it. No doubt I was right in reckoning it to have been a ship's bell. Its sonorous notes may have been reverberated in its time by the long-ago-vanished timbers of a carrack, or some tall ship belonging to old Spain or England.

I was for letting it lie, but thought, not for the thing that hampered it last night may have sense enough to sling it afresh and worry us as before; so I seized hold of it and succeeded in staggering with it painfully out of the wood, the thing occasionally tolling in a very melancholy way to the swaying of my figure as I lurched through the knee-high tangle. I succeeded in lugging it to where our luggage was, and sat down hot as fire and pretty near spent.

"There," said I, "if the bell-ringer has a mind to enjoy himself to-night, he'll have to show himself, and if he does, I'll pot him, if I never forgive myself for his murder afterward."

After breakfast I climbed with her to the summit of the little hill. It was all bare sapphire sea, streaked here and there with long shining curves like a running of quicksilver on the surface. The sky was brilliantly blue and cloudless, the wind a faint, parched draught from the north-east; the bite of the sun upon the exposed flesh was as through a burning glass. It was insupportable, and we descended the hummock, my companion pale and silent, I sick at heart; for though I had not dared look to see anything, yet the fulfillment of such an expectation as this brings a grief and rage with it, as of madness almost, with every recurrence, though you look for a ship fifty times a day, and always be sure in your soul before lifting your eyes that you will see nothing.

"Can it be possible," said Miss Grant, "that no ship ever passes within sight of this island?"

"Don't let us think that," said I, "for a long time yet at all events. We only came ashore here day before yesterday. The island lies very low, and there is plenty of ocean beyond the line of it all around us, so that a vessel might be within four or five leagues of us without seeing this Cay or we her."

"But there is land down in the west, Mr. Musgrave?"

"Yes, the film of it, so the men said, was visible from the 'Iron Crown's' cross-trees."

"Then," said she, "that stretch of water must be a passage between this island and the land there; so that a sail ought to be visible now and again."

"The mischief lies," cried I, "in my not knowing where we are. Those days of thick weather, with a head wind and some sort of current of which I knew nothing, threw me all adrift; not to mention old Broadwater's chronometer, which, in my opinion, ticked just close enough to Greenwich time to tell him when the hour for another glass of grog had come round. Of course, this island is one of the Bahamas. There is sure to be shipping hereabouts, making for the West Indies or the Panama or Mexican seaboard or steering eastward for European ports. We must be content to go on waiting and hoping. Who knows but that before sundown to-day we may be safe on board some craft, bound to some port whence we may easily make our passage to Rio?"

This was a fancy to put a light into her face. "I suppose," she exclaimed, suddenly, with a slanting glance at me, as though she could not summon courage to look at me fully, "you would never again undertake to escort a girl to her sweetheart?"

"Why, should I?" I answered, wondering at the meaning of the very faint smile that hovered airily as a shadow about the beauty of her lips. "It is thankless work, after all."

"Indeed, you may say that," she exclaimed.

"Oh, understand me. I don't mind the horrors of a mutineering experience or of being marooned. No, there may be a companionship sweet enough to neutralize the direst conditions. I mean, 'tis going through a great deal, you know, to oblige another."

"Poor dear Alexander," she cried, "he will feel obliged, I know; at least—" she paused suddenly with a reining in of her speech that made her cheeks flush somewhat to the effort. She struggled with an instant's confusion of mind, and then asked me calmly what I proposed to do that day, and what help she could be to me, but I saw in her eyes that she was still under the surprise of the thought whose utterance she had narrowly arrested. I could have sworn that she had only just saved herself from saying something which she would rather have bitten her tongue in halves than express. I looked at her again for a moment or two before answering; she was gazing seaward, as though the question she had this instant put had gone from her memory. Something in her manner—a subtlety as indeterminate as the aromas floating out into the hot, still air out of the hearts of the thousand secret and nameless flowers scattered throughout the island—quickened my

breathing, till I broke with a start from a fancy that might have held me profoundly meditative for the rest of the day, and told her what I meant to do.

"But there is nothing for me!" she inquired, bringing her eyes to mine, though I seemed to miss the peculiar, familiar steadfastness that I had again and again found as fascinating as it was perplexing.

"Can you cook, Miss Grant?"

She clasped her hands, sunk her head with a little shake of it, and said: "Not nicely, I fear."

"How is it made?"

"Why," said I, "by boiling the meat, I suppose. It will be something to do. I'll make a start by lighting the kitchen fire."

I forthwith fell to work to collect a quantity of wood, which I carried to the furnace, where it was soon blazing merrily with the thin blue smoke of it passing fairly out through the skylights, which I took care to open to their fullest extent; so that at the start the smoke set me coughing a bit, the atmosphere all round the spiral column was presently clear enough to enable me to breathe without inconvenience.

That the sun might not corrupt my turtle, I dragged it at the expense of many groans and much perspiration to the entrance to the underground rooms, down which I tumbled with it as though marooning had converted me into sort of ant; and indeed I felt like one, I can assure you; as I painfully dragged my prey to the hole and staggered with it into subterranean gloom.

"Yonder turtle-shell, said I, pointing to the creature I had killed, "when cleaned out and purified will make you an excellent hand-basin. You have a looking-glass and all other toilet requisites, as the hair-dressers call the things. As matters are, Miss Grant, we might be worse off. Better surely this roof than the two trees 'twixt which your hammock swung. Confess now that you have no longer any reluctance in taking up your abode here?"

She smiled, casting her eyes over the room with a glance at the skylight; and I observed the tremble of just a little faltering of resolution, so to speak, in the delicate pout of her under-lip.

"I have one small misgiving," she answered.

"What is it?" I asked.

"Suppose there should be a man on this island?"

"Well?"

"You don't believe there is; but somebody must have rung the bell."

"And supposing there should be a man?"

She shot another glance at the skylight, and answered, "He might shut us down here."

"How?" I asked.

"Why, Mr. Musgrave, by closing the skylights and covering them with sand, and then putting the cover on to the opening and piling sand on that, too."

"Well," said I, smiling, for my mind had long since got rid of the fancy that there might be a man somewhere hidden, though, as I admit, the midnight ringing was all the darker as a puzzle for that very notion, "there is but one way of checking the skulking rogue, and I'll attend to it immediately lest it should escape me," and mounting to the open, armed with one of the old muskets, I hammered at the hatch-cover till it lay before me in several pieces. These I squeezed one by one below, for the hatch was not to have been squeezed through the opening in its entirety. "Now," said I, "your friend the ringer may indeed close the skylights, but it will put him to his trumps to cover that entrance. Think—there is nothing on the island that would serve him for such a purpose, unless he should cut down a tree and whittle out a balk of it as a cork for that mouth. No, Miss Grant, little risk I think of our being buried alive."

My talk and the knocking to pieces of the hatch-cover reassured her, and as we might hope now that our turtle-broth had been boiling long enough, we prepared the little rustic table for dinner, and put on it a bottle of wine, the remains of a tin of meat, the cooked crawfish, along with a big bunch of plantains I had cut after bathing. But, alas! we had but one knife between us, no forks, spoons, nor plates. How then were we to ladle up the soup! Hitherto we had eaten with our fingers, and drunk from a meat tin; but the broth demanded an effort of ingenuity.

"I have it," I exclaimed, and stepping into the sunshine I made my way to the beach, where, collecting an armful of shells, big and little, I carried them to the brook, thoroughly cleansed them of the sand and salt, and returned with them to the kitchen. Better soup plates than the large shells made we could not have desired, and the smaller shells made excellent spoons. How the soup relished it boots not to say. Wanting salt, herbs, and the like, it lacked perhaps the savoriness that a city alderman is accustomed to meet with in a potage of turtle, but the meat proved juicy and the liquor grateful enough in its way, and though to be sure, it was a sort of mess that I could not look at now, I swallowed it then with enjoyment and appetite, giving secret thanks to Heaven that there was plenty more of it.

"It is strange that little boys should ever make men," said I, going to my coat for a cheroot. I am not very old myself,

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